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CHRIST IN POETRY.

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THE dictum of Plato concerning good poetry has not lacked for impressive testimony to its truth, in the influence of the central fact of history, as it has touched upon that art and in the attitude of the poetic art itself to the fact—the incarnation of God in Christ. Said the Greek philosopher: “All good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems, not as works of art, but because they are inspired or possessed.” Remembering what a feeble apprehension he had of the radical significance of Jesus Christ in the life and hope of man, we are not surprised at the method with which Matthew Arnold dealt with human problems, and the alleviations he offered for them. It is not too much to say that he furnishes an example of how surely even the most poetic fact of all time missed the privilege of enlarging and harmonizing one of the voices of our own time, because his spirit would be neither “inspired or possessed” by it. Mention is made of this fine figure in the history of that poetical literature which refers to Christ, because, at the outset of the study, it is well to reflect that the first thing demanded by Christ, either for salvation or for poetic representation, is the open soul, the child-spirit—something capable of being “inspired or possessed.” This capacity for being “inspired or possessed” Christ himself acknowledged that he must have before he might bless or redeem. “We are saved by faith.” From poet to poet Christ has gone in vain, “because of their little faith.” Matthew Arnold was a musician with fine and exquisite ear for truth and beauty and goodness, with a voice of somewhat thin quality and yet of sure-footed mastery, as he attempted his characteristic treble-tones, preferring minor to major, his whole personality dominated by such high intellectual power and such preconceived theories as to what is indeed “the song with which the morning stars sang

together," that the deep and universal theme and strain which reached its complete expression in Jesus Christ pleaded in vain at the portals of his soul and therefore could not either "inspire or possess him." He was a Greek, questioning, acute, wise, and sad. Plato was Greek, and more,—for he was so human as to be a prophet of the Christ, as were Isaiah and Virgil. The difference between Plato and Arnold may be seen in the comparison of the statement of Plato with that of Arnold, when this more recent thinker tells us that "poetry is the criticism of life." One, in pre-Christian days, touches the essential method of Christ-finding and truth-getting by pleading for that receptive, open-souled hospitality for experiences by which he may be "inspired or possessed;" the other, in Christian days, reverts to a method by which even the highest pre-Christian truth was missed. In those days men possessed themselves in self-contained and impeccable calm. The poet is always the organ of a voice and a theme above him.

The place of Jesus Christ in the world's poetry may only be partially intimated here; but a few of the illustrations of how the poetry which has worshipped him has been saved and exalted by him are possible in such a brief excursus; and from them it is clear that Christianity has never been able to undo its essential nature by violating its own spiritual method. On the other hand, it has uttered itself on the lyres of the greatest poets because, not so much by the genius of this world alone, but by the genius which is open to the whispers of the universe, the highest souls have been the humblest. Therefore they have been so "possessed and inspired" that his divine glory has made their song immortal.

The poetry of Christianity may say, "I am apprehended of Christ that I may apprehend" the meaning of the world, the significance of man's life and struggle, the immeasurable hope and destiny, the open secret of Omniscient God. Only as any poetry is the result of the mutual life of mind and heart, as they are "inspired or possessed," by truth revealed to man, as he is influenced by plans higher than man's limping thought, is it a worthy "criticism of life." Only as any poetry records the supreme spiritual events, not unreasonable but above the ken of reason alone, and

visions of being to which men may aspire, is it, or can it be, a true "criticism of life." Jesus of Nazareth, as Saviour and Master, is life's truest, because life's most hopeful and sympathetic critic, flooding life's realm and process by the radiance of himself, at once man's revelation of God and God's revelation of man.

His presence in the plan of God, in the universal movement, leading

"to that divine far-off event
Toward which the whole creation moves,"

his existence and influence in the groaning system of incomplete creation as the Reason which was from the beginning and will be the Reason for it all at the consummation, his progress through the life of man's up-looking and seeking spirit, the hope of him which was the inevitable product of the soul as it was constituted and led by God through the evolution of its life and ideal—these are within, if they have not created that melodious rune which sings in the changing mass called nature. Poetry witnesses that these have made the "mighty riddle of that rhythmic breath" in the world of man's thought and sentiment which "suffers him not to rest." Poetry is the art which taps this central, elemental stream which "flows through all things," and, listening to its harmony, finding that it has discovered and has been made rhythmic with the musical theme, the poet's soul obeys, because it is "inspired and possessed" by this imperative cadence. When it expresses its experience with all possible fitness the result is undying verse.

Therefore the psalmists and prophets were men almost necessarily poetic. Poetry came when a Jacob wrestled until the breaking of the day with what seemed the incarnate Infinite, though it were called only an angel; or when, like Moses, a fine human eye, looking through flame and feeling that truth or goodness may not be burned, had listened to the Eternal in a burning acacia bush; or when, with the hot blast of life's problem bursting from a fiery furnace one saw a form like unto the Son of God; or when out of an abyss of despair a soul, like Job's soul, cries for a daysman that shall stand between God and man; or when a lawgiver, knowing the impotence of Sinai to govern men, looks

ever so vaguely for a lawgiver whose law shall have an authority like that of Calvary, toward whose altar all other altars seem to lean. Whatever opinions one may entertain as to the supernatural element in Hebrew prophecy and psalmody in the sacred writings, it is impossible to suppose that minds willing to be "inspired or possessed," who are therefore poetic in temper and method, should miss the fact that nature and life are persistently enthroning a human manifestation of the divine, and that a Christmas-day is drawing nigh somewhere and somewhen.

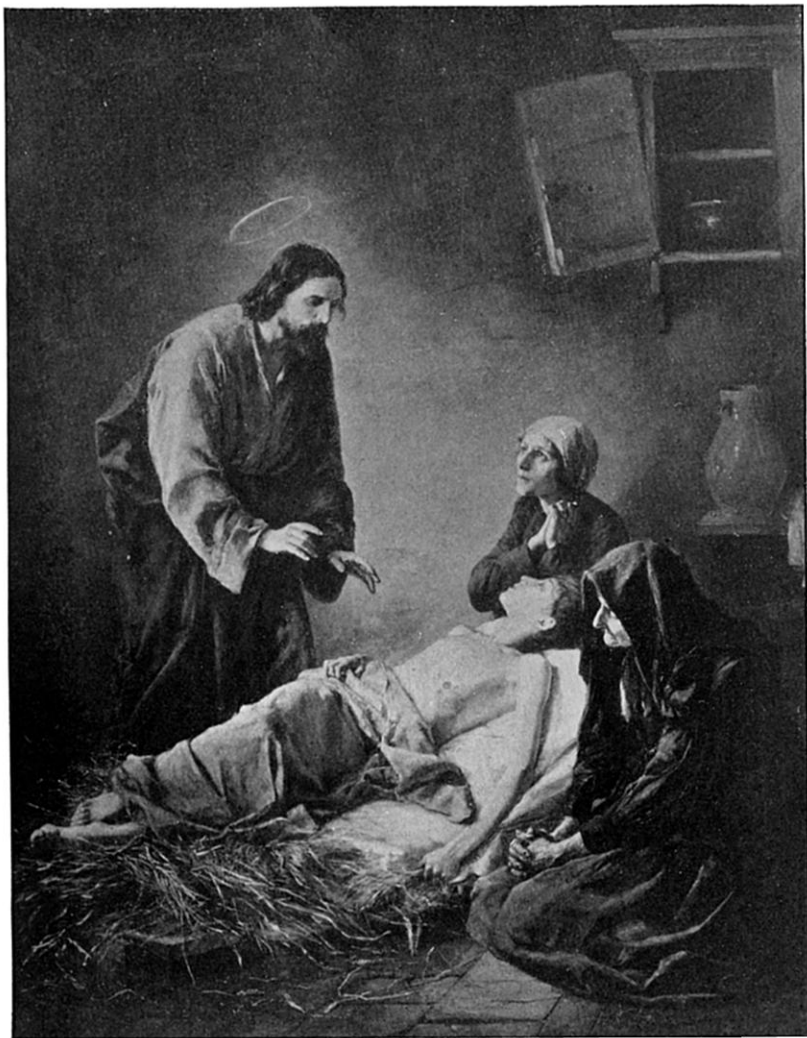
Virgil's fourth eclogue is to Christian poetry what Plato's vision of the "God-inspired man" is to Christian prose. It does not at all change the value of that poetry which, in the eloquent lines of Isaiah and other Jewish seers, exalts Christ, that we discover a noble propriety in the poem written on Virgil's tomb by a Christian singer; Dante himself might well acknowledge that the pagan, Virgil, had made him a Christian, as the Florentine sings to the Roman,

"On toward Parnassus thou did'st lead
My faltering steps, and in its grotts I drank;
And thou did'st light my wending way to God."

Beneath all the shadowy dreams of Israel and throughout all the expectant adoration of Messiah which sang its hope in the lines of prophet or bard in Hebrewdom, not less than in that "still sad music of humanity" which rises to the lips of pagan poetry, a true philosopher of literature and religion will see man obedient and hopeful in the presence of great symbolic ideals pointing Christward. These are the crude ore of poetry. Humanity has in all loftiest hours, when higher ideals have hurried men away at the cost of losing lower ideals, "drunk of that spiritual rock which followed them; and that rock was Christ." This minstrelsy has glorified the Redeemer. It was not strange that at the birth of Jesus the seeds of song garnered from the past should sprout and bloom instantly in the sunny day of that first Christmas. The old Hebrew verses melodious on the lips of those who had waited long, the o'erheard-wafts of psalmody of God's messengers, were gracious and divine overtures to that vast oratorio of Christmas-song in which saint and martyr, mys-

tic and hero, ecstatic monk and poetic queen, have prolonged the harmony until the days of Kirke White, Keble, and Phillips Brooks. From Christmas-time to Christmas-time new song-movements have entered into this verse. The age of Ignatius is not more different from the era of the Salvation Army than are the resonant lines that tell of the birth of Christ. Human pain has told its character and quality in the new adaptation to human deliverance which poetry has found in the Christ-child. Indeed, this constant changefulness of human circumstance and want has made the pictures of every event in Christ's life completer and truer; and each song, enshrining in its worship any place in his career on earth, in the form of hymn or poem, has made him no less the king of all the ages because in it he has appeared so adorable in a special age.

This fact gives an age its characteristic Christian poem. Dante's "Inferno" is to the poetry what the "Stabat Mater Dolorosa" is to the music of the Middle Ages; what the "Magna Charta" of the Norman Barons is to the politics; what Thomas A'Kempis' "Imitation of Christ" is to the prose; what Angelo's "Moses" is to the sculpture; what the Milan Cathedral is to the architecture; what St. Bernard's "Sermons on the Crusade" are to the eloquence; what Fra Angelico's angels on the walls of St. Mark's, Florence, are to the painting of the same worshipping twilight time. The "Stabat Mater" is both literature and song, and it is not only, as it has been characterized, the most pathetic,—it is the most characteristic hymn of mediæval time. It is an illustration of what fortune befalls a great emotion and experience as they take their memorial form in hymnology. Emilio Castelar speaks of the Middle Ages—that time of mingled light and shadow between the date of the fall of the western end of the old Roman empire and that of the revival of learning—the long thousand years of gloom between the death of the old and the birth of the new civilization—as the Good Friday of human history. This hymn is that dark day's interpretation in melody. Dante himself was the loftiest of the prophets of that larger Christ-portrait which he did so much to give to our modern poets, in order that they may bring it nearer to completion.



CHRISTUS CONSOLATOR.
—ZIMMERMANN.

Toward that complete picture each age's care or sorrow contributes something. The first Christmas was prophetic of that perpetual Christmas morning which is constituted by human history, when Christ's re-coming in divinely "possessed and inspired" humanity shall bring the Kingdom of God, and domesticate here below the City of God "that cometh down out of heaven." He said: "It is expedient for you that I go away." "I will come again and receive you unto myself." Every succeeding age perceives and acknowledges this divine expediency. In a sense deep and significant, throughout his whole career on earth, Christ was trying to get his followers to see how God yearns to possess and inspire men. He regarded himself as the head of humanity. He would not separate himself from the race, even so far as the worship of his disciples suggested. "Worship God," he said, "My Father—he doeth the works." But he bound them to himself in the high privilege of their being recipients of the divine. This they share with him. He even went so far as to say, "The glory which thou gavest unto me, I have given unto them." He gave men power to become the sons of God, and he had revealed the possibilities of sonship. In this he was beginning that process of persuading his disciples to be "inspired and possessed" of the divine life, as he was,—a process which he continued and made more nearly sure of completion when he said: "It is expedient for you that I go away." He wished men to live by the Spirit. He knew that in sending the Spirit he would send into man's life the soul of a divine society which would be slowly formed in the society of men by their obedience to the things of his, which the spirit would show unto them. Thus would he prepare for and accomplish his own second coming "with clouds and great glory." This continuous event—the second coming of our Lord—may, or may not, issue in a single sublime crisis. This is not the place to discuss that problem. It, however, certainly is occurring. The promise he made is actually being fulfilled; and it is in this new coming of Christ, as a power by which men's thoughts and sentiments and purposes are "inspired or possessed," that poetry finds ample themes, its situations of genuine nobility, its utterances of fairest prophecy.

Indeed, the history of the development of the Christ-idea as Redeemer and Lord of humanity, the judge of all the earth, and the express image of God's person in history, may be found only in this form of literature. He has given to poetry its true epic movement, reaching a more heroic dignity in each age; he has invested its labors with the task of uttering fitly the eternal drama of man; in his presence in life and struggle the lyric voices have caught for themselves the purest and clearest tones, and, especially in recent verse, poetry has proven her profound instinct for truth by running far in advance of theological statements and becoming prophetic of a more Christian orthodoxy. The two poets whose dust has recently been entombed in Westminster Abbey have been more vitally effective in enthroning Christ Jesus than all the divines of Westminster; and the singers of that Christianity whose Christ is coming again in every form of righteousness and peace to make the *creature*, man, a *son* of God, are leading more worshipers to Calvary and Olivet than even the framers of the historic confession and catechism. So, confining ourselves to one illustration, we may perceive how the living Christ is greater even than the historic Christ, as he is presented by another age's highest poetry.

If we compare John Milton, "organ-voice of England," with Robert Browning, who has a voice of less volume and richness of tone, we readily find that the Christ of "Paradise Lost" or "Paradise Regained" is as much less influential amidst the sovereignties of time and eternity, as the merely historic Christ is far removed from that perpetual human problem in which the ever-present Christ is creating a continuous and freshly-born Christmas day as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Taine is quite right in noting that much of the spectacle and movement of the divine in Milton's poetry was conditioned, if not produced, by the times of Charles I. of England. It is not a confession, either of ignorance or irreverence with regard to the great Puritan, to say that lofty as was his genius and rich as was his music, they never touched the deeps of the human problem nor did they reach the moral altitudes in which yearning and buffeted humanity has at length found peace with God. To a soul asking the questions

suggested in "Hamlet" and "Faust," not less than to a spirit perplexed with Lucretius or Æschylus, the splendid coronation of Jesus of Nazareth in Milton's best verse seems external and objective, not to say theatrical. The questions of life and time that pulse in the speech of the heart of man, until it grows a little weary of the trumpet-strains of Milton, are not modern or ancient queries; they belong to the soul of man and are uttered insistently whenever the soul has dared to reflect. Adam and Eve, "imparadised in one another's arms" are less interesting to the mind of man, as he feels for a Christ, than some spiritual Samson,

"Fallen on evil days and evil tongues,
With darkness and with danger compassed round."

But even a Christ for Samson is not sufficient. Doubtless Goethe was right; one of Milton's poems has "more of the antique spirit than any other production of any other modern poet," but it is not antiquity, or modernity, of spirit by which poetry, at length, has been gladly led to crown Jesus of Nazareth; it is the ageless and permanent spirit of man which, by elemental associations and needs, is destined to find a way to God. It would not have been enough if, when in his day Milton had met the queries of Giordano Bruno which still echoed at Oxford, or after the poet's visit to Galileo, he had been less wavering between the Copernican or Ptolemaic systems; the truth is that life has gone deeper and higher; it has grown larger needs, and the Christ answering to its thirst is greater. It is not true to say that our age has little else than

"This vile hungering impulse, this demon within us of craving."

The Christ shining in each age's poetry, in spite of the age's limitations, has made a new and larger portrait of man's Saviour necessary in the next age. He himself has confronted the soul's instincts—

"Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet the master light of all our seeing—"

and it is He who has said to the greater hopes which are children of greater spiritual struggles: "If it were not so, I would have told you."

The life-hunger which feeds upon the Christ of Robert Browning's poetry is not entirely the product of the two centuries lying between the date of "Paradise Regained" and the date of "Saul;" still less will the excellence of Browning's product account for the fact that it does, while that of Milton's does *not*, woo man's soul to adoration of the Christ. Browning's "Saul" is greater than any figure of Milton's verse, not as a creation by a better writer of rhymes, but only as a discovery of what is in man's heart and life, and of what no intervening centuries may make, namely, the hunger of the soul for redemption. The eye-glance of Browning brings to light the elemental facts in view of which there was "a lamb slain from the foundation of the world." It is the redemption of his poetry—this Christ-thirst—which cries with young David :

"O Saul, it shall be
A face like my face receives thee : a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever ! a hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee ! See the
Christ stand !"

This poem illustrates the force of the ageless, preëxistent and post-existent Christ, no more than does one of the poems of Browning which is full of a classical atmosphere. It is more significant than that in which Milton learned of Virgil. In the poem, "Cleon," the modern singer has not so much reproduced the accent as the spiritual experience which speaks out of the weary and unsatisfied heart of ancient life. Its tone is both modern and ancient. The poet's feeling is as old and young as the soul. Cleon cannot avoid uttering his prophetic words that cry for Christ, even though he may despise Paulus and stand pledged to honor the dumb Zeus. The value of such an offering as is this poem to the worship of Jesus lies not less in its swift, bold portraiture of the real Christ than in its perception of the fact that paganism in any soul, ancient or modern, has the agonizing need which was experienced at that hour of the Greek decadence. Mrs. Browning more lyrically sings of the vacant world when Pan was dead ; but Robert Browning alone has left a vivid portrait of the soul of man at that hour when, Cleon-like—poet

painter, and artist in method and in thought—the soul looks Christ-ward through mists of death, saying, as if to Him who brought life and immortality to light —

“I dare at times imagine to my need,
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in *desire* for joy,
To seek which the joy-hunger forces us.”

So does poetry rear her modest rose where Christ answers the thorniest doubt. Milton had no such temptations or doubts to be met by his genius for faith, and therefore he could not offer such a portrait of what is essential in Christ. Browning sings:

“Why come temptations but for man to meet
And master and make crouch beneath his feet?”

and

“I prize the doubt
Low things exist without,
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.”

Each age's Christ creates, by displacement of ideals born of need, a larger area of doubt around the fact of faith. Browning's age has apprehended a reality more nearly as great as is the Christ of God, because of its greater necessities. Every new age is a new Christmas-dawn for the eternal Christ—“the Word which was from the beginning,” who is also the “reason of God” at the end of all things. In this lies the important contribution to Christian theology which, as has been confessed by the most influential devotees of dogma, such poems as “Christmas Eve and Easter Day,” and “A Death in the Desert,” have made in our time. In all these poems, there is a witness to the fact that the new faith in Christ's power and work is an evolution out of the older. Even Milton hinted at a faith that evil

“Shall on its back recoil
And mix no more with goodness.”

Dante himself, at an earlier period, had suggested such a picture of Christ as made Milton's achievement in poetry and faith possible to his hand. And, earlier still, Virgil, the master of the Florentine, in that poetry which, before the historic Christ,

anticipated the presence of the real Christ, had sung so deeply that Dante acknowledged him as master after thirteen centuries had slipped away. He refers to Virgil as he sings :

“The season comes once more,
Once more come Justice and man’s primal time.
And out of heavenly space a new-born race
A poet by thy grace and thus a Christian too.”

It is this intimate acquaintance which he has with the real needs of man, deeper than any utterance of the time of Virgil, Dante, or Milton, that gives Browning such a relationship with the dominant harmony that works through the discords of all times,—a harmony uttered completely only in Christ. In the three last mentioned poems from his muse, nothing is lost because he has in mind a Strauss, a Darwin, or a Renan, or even some staggering superstition, puerile in its second childhood,—each of these is a force in our troubled age. He simply places all these beneath the throne of Christ and makes them bow before the manger-cradle. Life is evermore the “chance o’ the prize of learning love,” and it is our noblest possibility

“To joint
This flexile, finite life once tight
Into the fixed and infinite.”

Where is this infinite, or where is this finite jointed thus?
How shall he learn to love? The answer is given in Christ.

Helpful was the light,
And warmth was cherishing and food was choice
To every man’s flesh, thousand years ago,
As now to yours and mine ; the body sprang
At once to the height, and stayed : but the soul,—no !
Since sages who, this noontide, meditate
In Rome or Athens, may descry some point
Of the eternal power, hid yestereve ;
And, as thereby the power’s whole mass extends,
So much extends the æther floating o’er
The love that tops the might, the Christ in God.

It is this Christ in the song of universal being which makes the poet’s rhyme, in which over all and in all and above all is

revealed God in Christ, so that we see Him even on the unsubstantial glory of nature itself.

Another rainbow rose, a mightier,
Fainter, flushier, and flightier,
Rapture dying along its verge!
Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge,
WHOSE, from the straining topmost dark,
On to the keystone of that arc?

.
He was there.

He himself with his human air.

The Song of Mary.

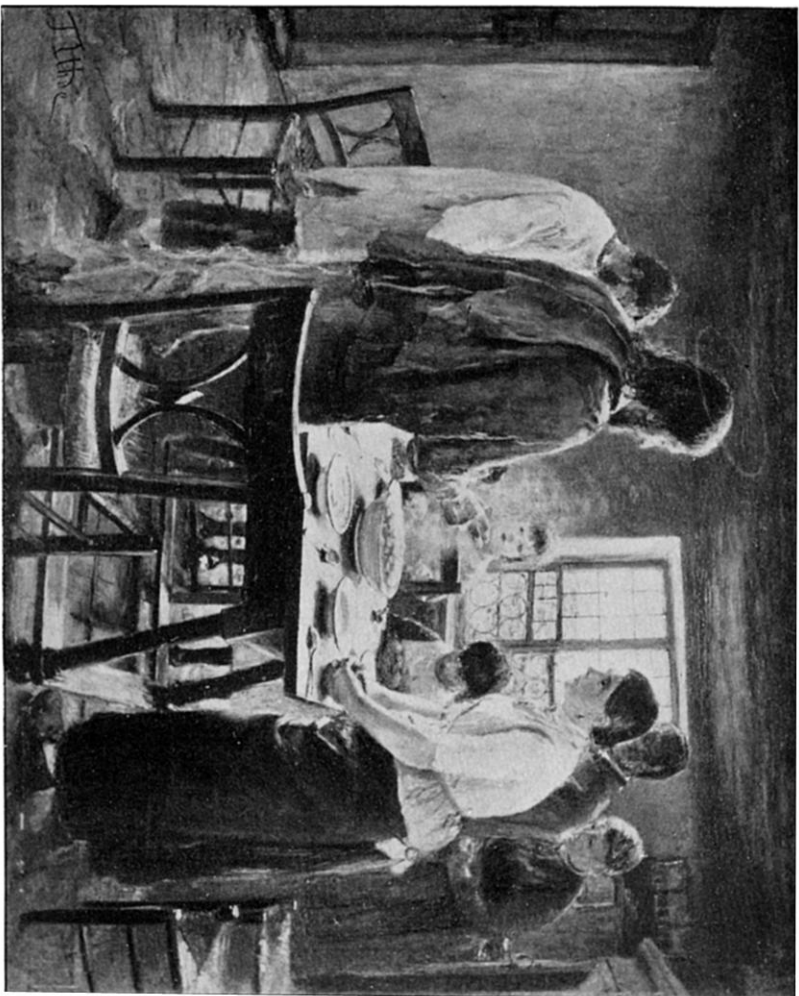
My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour;
For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaid;—
For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call
me blessed.
For He that is mighty hath done great things for me
And Holy is His Name.
And His mercy is unto generations and generations
Of them that fear Him.

He hath shown strength with His arm,
He hath scattered the proud by the imagination of
their hearts,
He hath put down princes from their thrones
And hath exalted them of low degree!
He hath filled the hungry with good things
And the rich hath He sent empty away!

He hath holpen His servant Israel
That He might remember mercy
(As He spoke unto our Fathers)
Towards Abraham and his seed forever.

ERRATUM,

The illustration printed on page 517 of the December BIBLICAL WORLD should have been marked "Christ in a Peasant's Home"—*Von Uhde*.



THE FRIEND OF THE LOWLY
—L'HERMITTE.